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ABSTRACT

Two issues, one familiar and the other less so, emerge from the controversy over declining scores on standardized tests in the United States and the growing movement toward minimal competency testing mandated by government. The familiar issue involves the balance between egalitarianism and elitism in American education. The second, a reemerging issue, is that of pluralism in American education. The minimal competency legislation being adopted in many areas prompts questions of accountability, especially mutual accountability of schools, parents, teachers, and students. A four-point agenda is suggested for expanding the minimal competency testing function: (1) deciding what competencies the community wants to measure: (2) finding a balance in types of tests and determining result reporting measures: (3) insistence upon standards of excellence that encourage performance at the upper level of the scale and deemphasize poor performance at the lower end: and (4) full consideration of what will happen to students who don't meet minimum standards. The questions of curriculum and basic skills development are closely linked to the minimum competency issue, and they have no irreconcilable differences. Despite the difficulty and inconvenience of implementing real change in the area of basic skills, it would be worthwhile for groups of teachers, school administrators, school board members, and parents to get together to align with the common purpose of doing more about the basics. In broad terms, the tests themselves are not very important: however, the increased interest in them does present new problems and opens new prospects for the development of pluralism in American education. (MSE)

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WHAT SHALL WE DO ABOUT DECLINING TEST SCORES?

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WHAT SHALL WE DO ABOUT DECLINING TEST SCORES?

Willard Wirtz

At the recent National Conference on Achievement Testing and Basic Skills,[1] Senator Claiborne Pell outlined the basis on which the Senate Education Committee has been moving toward legislation that would authorize the development of national standardized academic tests—to be used as "models" and in no way made mandatory. When he sensed a degree of reservation in the questions subsequently put to him, the Committee chairman suggested a straw vote. Among the 400 conferees, most of them teachers or state or local school-system officials, two raised their hands in support of the national model test proposition; any abstainers were lost in the cloud of arms that went up in opposition. "Something here," the always thoughtful and deeply concerned Senator commented wryly, "is obviously screwed up."

Whatever the merits of the Senate Committee's apparent views about national model tests, Chairman Pell's observation aptly describes the current state of the controversy about both the testing issue and the related question of renewed curricular emphasis, especially at the secondary level in American education, on basic skills.

The conference had opened with an address by former Commissioner of Education Harold Howe Jr., who referred to the fact that 19 states have now adopted "minimal competency" laws; 16 others have moved similar statutes to the planning stage, and 11 more have initiated studies of the matter. Yet there also was released at the conference a report on *Improving Educational Achievement*, prepared for the Assistant Secretary for Education by a prestigious panel on testing and basic skills appointed by the National Academy of Education. The panel's key conclusion is that "any setting of state-wide minimum competency standards for awarding the high school diploma—however understandable the public clamor which has produced the current movement and expectation—is basically unworkable, exceeds the present measurement arts of the teaching profession, and will create more social problems than it can conceivably solve."

Two days before the conference convened, President Carter sent to the Congress a bill proposing the largest increase in history in the federal aid-to-education budget. "We must do a better job," the President said in his accompanying message, reflecting a strong public sentiment, "of teaching basic skills to all our children." Yet a week earlier, the *Washington Post* had carried Christopher Jenck's article entitled "The Wrong Answer for Schools Is Back to Basics."[2] Most teachers probably share Jenck's view that ". . . Today's students are *not* doing worse on what educators and parents traditionally think of as the 'basics'—the three R's. . . . If schools need to do anything today—and it is doubtful that schools alone can solve the problem—it is to get back to complexity, not to the basics."

One thing obviously out of kilter, not for the first time in American experience, is the link between public and scholastic perceptions of the ways and means of learning.

The real cross-currents, however, run much deeper than this. The further one gets into the minimal competency testing and back-to-the-basics controversies, the more one doubts whether these questions are as important in themselves as they are being made to appear. Two underlying issues emerge; one in familiar form, the other with promising new dimensions.

The familiar issue, recently addressed by Harold Howe,[3] involves the balance between egalitarianism and elitism in American education. Even if equality were assumed to be all children's birthright, it is clear that from the day of their birth onward they are beneficiaries and victims of the haphazard handicapping process that characterizes the sweepstakes of life. The testing and curricular emphasis issues involve the old questions of how the schools should handle this disparity; of how equal treatment can be provided to unequals; of how much account should be taken—while avoiding the dangers of leniency—of the fact that different children have different reasons for going to school and are bound for different destinations.

The other emergent issue in the current debates is also old, but it has now surfaced with new sharpness and potential promise. It could be called "pluralism in American education."

The theme of the 1978 AAHE conference, "Lives in Transition," highlights this issue. I believe that one of the impediments to the free and productive flow of individuals' transitory life experi-

ence is the separatism of institutions—among them, and perhaps most significantly, the educational institutions. Some deep digging last year into the data on the drop in college entrance examination scaled score averages resulted in the discovery of so many possible contributing causes[4] that the report of the excavation was fairly criticized as inconclusive. However, it became much clearer in the course of that exercise what will be required to improve the situation the statistics reflect.

In my judgement, the largest promise for the strengthening and enrichment of education in America lies in improving the coordination between the teaching that goes on in the schools and the learning that takes place in the family; in developing new working alliances between teachers and parents, and, more broadly, between the schools and the rest of the community.

The minimal competency testing and back-to-the-basics initiatives are manifestations of a perhaps unprecedented public interest in education. Recriminatory exchanges between teachers and the public over these possibly false issues can only result in increased antagonism and separatism; they seem to me short-sighted and self-defeating. The best possible development would be the acceptance of two or three issues—such as testing and curricular emphasis—as issues of *common* concern, worth honest but constructive disagreement, requiring *mutual* resolution and *cooperative* new initiatives.

THE ACCOUNTABILITY QUESTION

The public attitude reflected in the "minimal competency" legislation being adopted in so many states and in the bills being considered in the Congress includes three principal convictions: that quantifiable standards of some kind are necessary as a matter of discipline; that a stricter system of credentialing is needed; and that there ought to be some improved way of determining how good a job the educational agencies are doing.

The third element is causing the most trouble. "Accountability" has become a scare word in the teaching profession. This is an understandable development, since it is unquestionably the schools that the public seems intent on holding accountable. The public's habit of institutionalizing blame has been encouraged by the political and the media reporting process. Voters are constantly told by politicians that one institution or another is responsible for the country's headaches and misfortunes; vicissitude is charged to the leadership, never to the membership. With a few exceptions, such as the *Christian Science Monitor*, the media follows suit by finding news primarily in identifying institutional and personal culprits. Only what the lawyers call "proximate" causes are covered in the news columns most people read. With the exception of occasional poll reports, the coverage of underlying reasons tends to be confined to the editorial page. It is difficult to write a story about a malfunction in the national membership—which is also the newspaper-reading and the radio-listening and the television-watching audience. Pictures cannot capture this story, and it isn't considered a circulation or Nielsen-rating booster.

The reporting of the decline in academic test scores has followed this pattern. The decline has been viewed generally as evidence of deterioration in the *formal* educational process, with little or no recognition of the fact that the data provide no basis for distinguishing between the contributions to the decline of the schools. The proposals for state legislation are cast invariably in terms of the public's interest in accountability only of the schools.

Tilting against the concept of accountability is a quixotic undertaking. Protest about what declining SAT and ACT scores don't prove, findings about the effect on score averages of changing composition in the test-taking population, and defensive arguments about the things the schools are teaching but the tests aren't measuring are useless and impractical defenses. The practical question is whether it is possible to embrace the idea of accountability while insisting that its measures be made more reliable and that it be applied to measure the responsibility of the community at large, including the schools, instead of the schools alone. Although the chances of this succeeding may seem dubious, they are worth taking if only because there is no choice.

A little sense of humor about the situation wouldn't hurt. There was Woodrow Wilson's reply, when he was president of Princeton, to the parent's written inquiry about whether the University could be counted on to equip the family scion to conqure the future: "Dear Sir," Wilson wrote back, "We guarantee only to return whatever you send us in no worse condition than that in which it was received."

I am inclined to credit, with some reservations about their face value, the pollsters' reports that while most people who are asked why the academic test scores have been going down reply in terms critical of the schools, more than half of them answer the different question of what can be done about this situation in terms of an assumption of larger responsibility by parents. The distinction between the form of the questions is fine but critical. Although it might be soul-satisfying to suggest measures of accountability that would include setting beside the test-score decline statistics on increasing divorce rates and the number of working mothers, it would be tactically pointless. If we could summon the wit and the common sense to turn the accountability question just enough to emphasize the necessary mutuality of whatever is to be done to improve the learning process, there would probably be a working majority of parents—and even taxpayers and voters on bond issues—willing to be allies as well as critics.

No one is clear about how much of the learning process develops in the home, in the schools, in other institutional settings, or in the workings of the individual mind—which apparently is able to resist quite a bit of damage inflicted from outside. What we know for sure is that all of these influences enter in large measure into the learning process.

If we can start from this realization and recognize that education in this country is the best in the world, and poor only by measure of what we know it could be, we could develop and implement a practical, salable, and constructive idea of mutual accountability. This approach would be addressed not to what has happened, but to what needs now to be done; it would accept the importance of tests as the best devices currently available, not only as a learning discipline, but as instruments for implementing the principle of identifiable responsibility; and it would say simply and plainly that it is the schools *and* the rest of the community, teachers *and* parents *and* students who are responsible for what happens in the learning process.

If the accountability question can be cleared up, there will be a better framework for shaping whatever new testing procedures are established to the realities of the situation.

The necessary counterpart of mutual accountability is shared undertaking of the responsibility for improving the educational process; not just in making policy, but in implementing whatever policies are adopted. The case against federal control of testing and for sternly limited exercise of state authority in this area rests essentially on the fact that it is only at the local community level that effective forms of collaboration between teachers and parents and other educational agencies can be worked out. Such collaboration can't possibly be mandated effectively. Its meaningful development at the local level, however, will be the only sure protection against interference.

EXPANDING THE TESTING FUNCTION: A FOUR-POINT AGENDA

I would suggest a four-point agenda, for consideration at the local community level, for expanding the testing function. The suggestion assumes that this agenda will be taken up through deliberative rather than adversary processes. It also assumes full and meaningful participation in these deliberations by teachers, school administrators, parents, employers, labor unions, taxpayers generally, and representatives of youth interests. All of these groups would work with the local school board, but exercise more than advisory responsibility.

Item number one on the agenda would be deciding what minimal competencies the community proposes to measure.

Item number two would have to do with the types of tests and testing procedures to be used. Deliberate and conscious decisions will have to be made by the community about the extent to which it wants its children's tests to be exclusively or even primarily objective-answer examinations; about the balance it desires between criterion-referenced and norm-referenced tests; and about the reporting of results on these tests. It will have to decide whether it wants to accept the typical test designer's doctrine of convenience—that tests can be used reliably to predict students' success only at the next academic level, not beyond that. I think the community will insist, when it gets into the matter, that some method be developed of giving account in whatever testing method is used to the varying rates at which each individual's capacities develop.

Broadened participation in the policymaking aspects of testing will require a substantial opening-up of the examinations themselves. The designers and administrators of standardized tests have

developed strict procedures to assure the security of the examinations, insisting that this is necessary to avoid what would otherwise be insurmountable difficulties. Although this will not be an easy matter to handle, some alternative answers must be found if the affirmative values in expanded reliance on tests are to be served.

I hope agenda-item number three will be, in every community, an insistence that no minimal competency standards be established except as they are complemented by equally clear and equally respected standards of excellence. The short-sightedness of state legislatures dealing with this matter can be measured by the fact that they have directed attention almost exclusively to the problem at the bottom of the scale, without considering the effect at the top. Increased emphasis on tests is bound to mean more "teaching to the tests." Unless there is testing not only of the capacity to survive, but also of the capacity to excel, the consequence will be a lowering of sights by teachers, students, and the community.

Item number four has to be a full consideration of what will happen to, and what can be done about, students who don't measure up to the minimum competency standards. Most of the state legislation adopted so far appears to proceed on the euphoric assumption that tightening up the standards will mean that students and teachers will do whatever is necessary to meet them, and that special remediation methods—usually not specified—can be devised to cover the cases where this is difficult. This kind of assumption rests on only half the truth.

What is not fully realized yet is that the issue behind the increased testing proposal is the question of what balance we want to establish between elitism and egalitarianism in American education. There is reason to doubt whether the averages on many of the standardized tests would have gone down significantly over the past ten years if it hadn't been for the effects, both direct and indirect, of the increased high-school retention rate that came about in the United States during the 1960's. It is reasonable to accept increased testing as *part* of the course of action that is necessary to shore up minimum competencies. But unless a responsible affirmative-action program is instituted, the consequences of increased competency testing will certainly be an upturn in what we have called the "drop-out" rate. The test-score averages of those staying in school will go up, but we won't know from these figures what has happened to the education of youth as a whole.

The question of whether the tests that are used are "culture free" will also arise in connection with the fourth item. The use of this phrase, with particular reference to racial differences, seems to me largely futile and misguided. No test can be "culture free." The community's emphasis should be on the question of how it proposes to take into account the critical fact that children of lower income and less educated parents, a disproportionate number of whom are members of minority groups, average substantially lower than do other children on virtually all measures of academic competence. Nobody, particularly among minority groups, will espouse a standard of educational egalitarianism that carries the price of reduced quality. Until the implications of this dimension of the testing issue are finally taken into account, a community's consideration of minimal competency testing can only be superficial.

I have suggested these four items for inclusion on a local community agenda in an attempt to indicate what seems to me the direction of appropriate state legislation: that it would mandate, if necessary, local action in this pattern; but that it would *not* attempt to resolve these questions itself.

As for federal activity in this area, there was substantial support among the HEW conferees for the position taken by Secretary Califano in his address to the conference, which was spelled out in a document prepared by the National Institute of Education and the Office of Education and submitted to the conferees. There is a great deal to be done about research in the testing area, about training teachers and school administrators in the use of standardized tests, and about educating the public against the misuse of standardized test results.

I have a further suggestion for federal support. There is general agreement that when cross-sectional tests are given to a group of students and scores are compared with those on similar tests given to other groups of students at the same age or school-class level, the end results can only tell part of the story when aggregate averages are relied on. A good deal more information would come out of "longitudinal studies" that followed various student cohorts from year to year or at five-year intervals. The difficulty is that such studies are extremely expensive. Federal support for them would be necessary.

What is important to keep in mind in considering the testing issue is that despite the disagreements there is a lot of common ground. There is an unprecedented public interest in education—it is reflected, however poorly, in the insistence on establishing firmer learning standards. My suggestions are not for compromise, but for a cease-fire and for serious negotiation. The enemy is not the public; is not even ignorance. It is the danger of missing the chance to raise the quality of education in America even higher than it already is.

BASIC-SKILLS DEVELOPMENT

The questions of testing, curriculum, and basic-skills development are closely related and seem to me to have no irreconcilable differences. Rather, the prospect is for resolution through substantial strengthening of the learning process—if we can just get through the semantic underbrush.

One can view the current concern about basic competencies as a "public clamor" for a "return to the basics," in the sense of going back to uniform courses of study in the grade and high schools, built around reading the classics, diagramming sentences, and memorizing multiplication tables. If the basic-skills issue is framed in these terms, a good many members of the public would probably say that this is what they want—along with cutting back on the electives in the high school curriculum, dropping the "new math" nonsense and the rest of the experimenting, *making* students read, and teaching students to spell, to punctuate, and to guarantee every sentence a subject and a predicate.

There is a danger of oversimplifying the meaning of this reaction. The public is not interested in more Carter's Little Liver Pills or Lydia Pinkham's patented nostrums. While public discussion is characteristically in terms of neat short-hand phrases and familiar illustrations, most people's thinking is not generally so shallow as their catch-phrases might suggest. If educators could bend a little, not condenscendingly or in a spirit of promise, but with an honest desire to find common meaning behind different ways of saying things, we might find a meeting ground. There is significant promise in the public initiative about basic skills.

Writing Skills

The best starting place for clarifying what basics we are taling about seems to me to be what can be called, over-simply, writing. The current national alarm about the state of young people's learning probably stems less from the public's second- or third-hand knowledge of declining scale score averages on standardized tests than from widespread first-hand exposure to young people's shocking lack of acquaintance with elementary written expression. There is considerable reason to believe that increased emphasis on writing—and oral expression—could offer maximum opportunity for improving the basic skills of thinking, of learning how to learn, of creativity, and of earning a living.

The more mechanical aspects of writing should not be ignored in any consideration of writing skills. There may well be a close correlation between illegible writing and genius; scribbling very possibly reflects a mind working at a pace that the system connecting the brain with the fingers can't keep up with. As for spelling, it was undoubtedly a self-serving rationalization when Andrew Jackson said that he "wouldn't give a damn for anybody who couldn't spell a word at least two ways." Some of the laws of punctuation seem devised to retard both thought and expression. Yet there is value in spartan discipline as a training process. Insisting on legible writing is as good a way as any to make the point that conscious consideration should be given to the reader of that writing. Students are entitled to be taught that they waste personal capital when they mis-spell or mis-punctuate a message; that they risk causing the receiver to believe that if the sender's spelling and punctuation are sloppy, the sender's thinking may be sloppy as well.

The critical importance of writing however, lies in its relationship to the basic skills of thinking and communicating and creating—in terms of both self realization or fulfillment and in terms of practical effectiveness. All of us have had the experience of mentally conjuring what seem to be cathedrals of coherence—until the attempt to blue-print them on paper reveals structures built of word-bricks that lack either straw or mortar. It would be intellectually prudish and nonsensical to suggest that only those whose adult careers involve writing are able to think clearly. However, in discussing youth's formal learning processes, it is important to realize that writing is

perhaps the most effective known discipline for developing the capacity to think responsibly. Creativity also implies something more than thinking, and writing is clearly one of creativity's outlets.

I believe that writing and speaking, as well as reading and listening, ought to be counted as the most important subjects on any vocational education curriculum—that they have the highest market value today for the largest number of young people.

If what I have said about writing is even a quarter true, it makes the importance of returning to the basics (always reserving the right to define those basics) very clear, especially given the percentage of young people who are completing their formal education today with, at best, a slight speaking acquaintance with the English language.

I would suggest three possible innovations:

(1) First, that from about the fourth or fifth grade through the twelfth, every student be assigned the daily homework (eventually in every course) of writing one paragraph about something. This work would be graded first at home by a parent, if one is available, and then read by the teacher or an assistant and returned with at least one sentence of written advice to the student. It is implicit in this suggestion that teaching writing be recognized as part of the responsibility not just of English teachers, but of all teachers—and of those parents who can help.

(2) Second, that no more than half of the testing material given any student be of the "objective answer" variety; and especially that college admission be conditioned at least as much on some form of written exercise or examination as on the results of objective-answer type tests.

(3) Third, that it become standard practice in all serious hiring situations, for whatever kind of employment, to require the applicant to write at least a few lines of prose—or for more intellectually demanding occupations, poetry.

Reading Skills

In the area of reading skills, most criticism has centered on the proliferation of elective courses in the secondary school curriculum. More and more students have been electing to take courses in science fiction, radio, TV, motion pictures, and so forth instead of Basic English IV. It would be a serious mistake to sacrifice the individual student interests that elective courses can awaken. What can be done is to simply hold these elective courses to high standards, equal to those that Basic English IV used to imply. Reading *is* basic, and it is too important to be left to English teachers alone.

It is less clear what effect television-watching has had on the development of reading and writing skills in students, although it has unquestionably cut into the amount of time available for reading and writing. The schools can't possibly, acting alone, do anything very effective in this area.

Arithmetical Skills

Too little attention has been given to the fact that, at least on the SAT test, the score decline has been more on the section measuring aptitude in verbal skills than on the mathematics section. Many educators wonder whether there would have been any decline in the mathematics average if it weren't for the reading factor in the mathematics test. The interesting question for others is whether arithmetical aptitude is significantly more a school-acquired skill, and reading aptitude a skill that is more dependent on what is learned at home. If this were true, the implication would be that the larger decline in the verbal score averages confirms the current importance of developing the school/home educational axis.

RESOLVING THE SEPARATISM PROBLEM

It would be unrealistic not to recognize the inherent difficulties of implementing some of these suggestions—for example, the time it takes to assign and correct written student essays or examinations. But before these difficulties are judged insuperable, it would be worthwhile for groups of teachers, school administrators, school board members and parents to sit down together and align with the common purpose of doing more about the basics.

We must find a basis for bridging the gap between the reactions of the public and the academicians to the testing and basic skills issues. The most serious problem facing the learning process in this country today seems to me to revolve around the separatism that exists between the formal educational agencies and the rest of the community, particularly the family. I am not necessarily suggesting the separatism is worse now than it has been in the past, although in some respects it probably is. It is possible that changes in contextual circumstance have caused the separatism that has always existed to have a larger adverse effect, and that it now represents a larger waste of potential.

Little is known about this problem area, partly because the family is a sensitive subject that is seldom discussed in public or even in academic forums. Factors such as differences in white and black family patterns and circumstances and changing concepts of maternal and paternal roles are variables that must be treated with delicacy. Anything ventured in a manner that appears critical of the family structure risks being labelled racist or sexist, although there is usually little empirical evidence to back up these charges.

We may safely emphasize a significant affirmative development: today's parents are sufficiently well-educated to want to take some responsibility for making education at home fit in with education at school. This may be part of the reason for their becoming more critical of the schools. It is, in any event, reason to enlist them as allies; participants are more temperate and constructive critics.

Simply telling the schools to get back to teaching the basics won't help and it won't work. A collaborative local undertaking, however, to identify the essential learning values and to implement these values cooperatively will attract considerable support.

The separation between the schools and the public is paralleled by the strained relationship that has developed between secondary and postsecondary education. At the risk of saying too little to be persuasive and only enough to be indiscrete, I confess to the strong feeling that higher education ought to be joined as a full party in the consideration of these problems, which have so far been identified as centering in secondary education.

Only a handful of those who use the declining averages on college entrance examinations to condemn the high schools recognize that these tests measure only a student's capacity to meet the academic requirements of first-year college courses, and that the predictive validity of these scores has (at least according to the available data) *increased* in recent years. Still fewer of these critics realize the implications of the fact that each new edition of the SAT for example, is scrupulously designed and scored so that the results can be equated with results from the test given in 1951. It strains the credulity of most people outside education to learn that this means that first-year college standards are assumed to be the same as they were a quarter of a century age.

If the college entrance examination scores are used to appraise secondary education in terms of societal values, the underlying assumption would have to be that the first-year courses offered in a relatively few elite and highly selective colleges and universities ten and twenty and twenty-five years ago represent an acceptable value base today for determining what the public wants from its high schools. Yet this premise would be vigorously rejected by those who rely most strongly on the SAT and ACT records to criticize contemporary secondary education.

There are some hard questions that have to be faced.

- How does the fact that most colleges now offer remediation courses in various subjects fit into this picture?
- What are the effects of grade inflation—at both the secondary and post-secondary levels?
- What account is taken, or should be taken, or the fact that new communication processes are used in many high school courses—while the college entrance examinations still rely entirely on linear reading?
- *Is* high school education today supposed to be as much a preparatory process leading toward a traditional first-year college course as it was considered to be, rightly or wrongly, ten or twenty or thirty years ago?
- More broadly, has a rational decision been reached about the proper division of teaching responsibilities, under present-day circumstances, between the high schools and the colleges? Are

"the basics" we want the high schools to emphasize for students who are going on to a liberal-arts college the same basics as those that are important for students who will not go on to college? How much of the controversy about standardized tests results from an underlying failure to identify clearly the values the high schools themselves are supposed to serve?

All questions; no answers. What is clear to me is that the whole relationship between secondary and post-secondary education warrants a thorough review.

In the broader terms of what is important today in recognizing the essentially transitional quality of life, I have tried to suggest what seems to me the necessity of breaking down the institutional separation that tends strongly to disrupt the flow of this transition. Tests are not important in themselves. What is important about this increased interest in tests is that it poses new problems and opens up new prospects with respect to the imperative pluralism of the learning process.

FOOTNOTES

[1]This conference was sponsored by the Department of Health, Education and Welfare, March 1-3, 1978. So much of the information in this paper is identifiable with suggestions made at the conference that this blanket acknowledgement will have to suffice.

[2]Jencks, Christopher. "The Wrong Answer for School Is Back to Basics." *The Washington Post*, February 19, 1978, p. C1.

[3]Paper presented by Harold Howe at the National Conference on Achievement Testing and Basic Skills.

[4]College Entrance Examination Board. *On Further Examination.* Report of the Advisory Panel on the Scholastic Aptitude Test Score Decline. New York, 1977.

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